

Alan Moore's America: The Liberal Individual and American Identities in *Watchmen*

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THE GRAPHIC NOVEL *WATCHMEN*, ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED AS A SERIES OF twelve comic books in 1986 and 1987, has established Alan Moore as among the very best writers in this medium.¹ At its core is an ensemble of diverse characters that explores fundamental issues for American national identity during the second half of the twentieth century. Moore's work performs this task in two ways, firstly, by presenting a group of diverse ideologically contingent American figures in the individual characters, and secondly, by highlighting a sacrosanct element of America's image of itself, the primacy of the "liberal individual" not just as an American type but as the naturalized core of the national ethos. This article maps this subject identity into a national identity such as that typified in Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, a small-n nationalism as a successor to kinship and religion, "an imagined political community [. . .] conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (5–6). Alan Moore's depiction of America is influenced by his love of American comics, but the thematic heft of his work is due to solid evaluative research on American history, politics, and technology. The resulting product presents a coterie of costumed heroes as players on the stage of history in a type of story that resonates with the preoccupations of post-war American culture, a conspiracy narrative that highlights the issues of individual and collective identity and agency.

Watchmen is an alternative history that starts on October 12, 1985 and runs to early the following year. While it frequently references historical occurrences until 1970, it covers a time period in the immediate past barely a year previous to publication. Because of the

government co-optation of some members of the costumed crime fighter guild the “Watchmen,” America wins the Vietnam War, Richard Nixon is in his fourth term as president, and automobiles run on electricity. The societal upheavals of the 1970s, Watergate, the energy crisis, and defeat in Vietnam are absent, as are, curiously, fixed-wing aircraft. The presence of costumed crime fighters is entirely *cognitive*, that is, they are naturalized within the rational logic of the world as presented in the work.² With one exception, these masked adventurers are nothing more than normal humans in great physical condition who like to dress up and go after “bad guys.” The story centers on Rorschach’s investigation of an associate’s murder, which triggers his suspicion that some person or group has begun killing “masks.” This conspiracy theory is borne out by the subsequent hostile actions against the costumed crime fighters throughout the narrative. In conclusion it is revealed that another of their cohort, Ozymandias, has teleported a monster into New York City, killing over three million people, in order to avert nuclear war between the US and USSR. While this is shocking in its conception and perhaps maddening in its execution, the clear and looming alternative was a full nuclear exchange that would have led to a greater death toll. This plot succeeds in convincing the rival governments that earth had been invaded by a trans-dimensional being, and subsequently the US and USSR are unified in the face of a new mutual threat.

While both Alan Moore and his illustrator David Gibbons are British, their portrayals of the costumed heroes in aggregate treat American national identity in a sophisticated and nuanced manner. The first concrete indication of alternative history hinges upon the basic issue of the political make-up of the United States. On the fourth page of the first issue, a newspaper headline declares “Vietnam 51st State—Official!” (I, 4).³

But the issue of American national identity is even more ingrained in the work. In their earlier, original incarnation, the costumed heroes adopted the name “The Minutemen.” The twin historical references are to the American Revolutionary War militia and to the intercontinental ballistic missile in the arsenal of the US Air Force’s Strategic Air Command since 1962. This simultaneous linking of the ideals of the Revolutionary War with a mass-produced Cold War weapon system guided by a designated computer provides a referential dissonance that invokes a latent conflict in post WW2 American culture. While liberty

in the nuclear age is regarded to be dependent upon large-scale and technologically sophisticated *collective* action, the ideology of the American Revolution was fiercely defensive of the liberal *individual*. The Cold War strategy of "Mutually Assured Destruction" makes the survival of the collective, that is, the society or civilization, an issue of paramount importance. In the face of these challenges to the liberal individual, the very idea of a costumed superhero seems anachronistic.

Timothy Melley's *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America* employs critical perspectives that are extremely useful in discussing this tension. Melley examines the nature of postwar America in terms of a psychological dissonance between a society in which agency is attributed to collective actors, such as government bureaus and corporations, and the autonomous liberal individual. Citing numerous sociological, management, and scientific discourses of the early postwar period, he argues

that the rise of conspiracy and paranoia as major themes in late-twentieth-century American culture is connected to changing social and technological conditions and to new conceptions of human subjectivity. The numerous narratives that grapple with these challenges are often conflicted in their attempts to represent social control while defending a fantasy of individual autonomy and distinctness. [. . .] Their cultural function [. . .] is not only to articulate such fears but also to reassert the vitality of a more familiar and comforting model of self in response. (44–45)

This article counts *Watchmen* among these narratives. The sense of loss of individuality, added to the feeling that one is observed and controlled by external forces, is labeled by Melley as *agency panic*, "a nervousness or uncertainty about the causes of individual action" and "a secondary sense that controlling organizations are themselves agents" (12). While all of the characters in *Watchmen* exhibit some agency panic, most of them are possessed by a personally driven vigilantism that manifests the autonomy and purposeful action attributed to the liberal individual.

This is particularly significant for considering the United States' notion of national identity: "The concept of the liberal individual [. . .] has long been celebrated in American political culture, particularly in the guise of 'rugged individualism' and atomistic 'self-reliance'" (14).

The autonomous individual is present on many levels in *Watchmen*. First, as highly individuated persons, the Watchmen en masse stress the prominence of this aspect of American identity. Their very existence contributes on a mythological level to the importance placed on individuality in the notion of what it means to be an American. Also, as individuals, they embody ideologically contingent roles in American society, each characterizing a distinct political or economical value, rehearsed as domestic or foreign policy. Yet, this is also problematical; as crime fighters these hyper-individuals act for the putative good of the “collective.” Taken in sum, though, plot and character elements suggest that, even in the face of technological complexity combined with political bungling, the organ of society is portrayed as influenced by individual action.

As Jamie A. Hughes points out, “With each passing year, super-heroes are becoming more involved in ‘real world’ scenarios that mirror the current political and social problems” (547–48). The cognitive, everyday humanness of the Minutemen (Dr. Manhattan excepted) illustrates that “The superhero in *Watchmen* has become just another facet of society” (Reynolds 109; cited in Hughes 548). But this is a highly symbolic facet, one that provides a defining cultural charge to a general notion of American identity within the narrative. An editorial in the ultra-right wing *New Frontiersman*, defends the present-day costumed crime fighters by linking them to Revolutionary War heroes, conflating both groups into symbols of American identity.

Would our sense of national identity, our pride, our sense of honor; would these things be so enduring were it not for such great symbols of freedom as Paul Revere’s midnight ride, or the Alamo, or the Gettysburg Address? [. . .] The overall effect of [critical *Nova Express* pieces] is that of [. . .] [an] attack upon not only [. . .] the individual costumed adventurers themselves, but also upon a whole American institution!

(VIII *New Frontiersman* 1–2)

Clearly, then, the Watchmen are naturalized as facets of American society; but, in addition, each of the costumed heroes can be seen to symbolize a *different* facet, representing contemporary societal issues and problems.

The first is Edward Blake, the Comedian, whose costume resembles that of the Marvel superhero, Captain America. Like his Marvel comics

analogue, he is draped in stars and stripes from the American flag, and, like Captain America, he uses his skills and costumed hero persona to fight against Communist insurgents and governments, not domestically (as Captain America did in the 1950s), but as a tool of American foreign policy. It is generally known that "he has good government connections, and it often seemed as if he was being groomed into some sort of patriotic symbol" (III *Under the Hood*, 11). The question is: what sort? Blake displays racial intolerance, abusive behavior to women, and a gleeful appreciation of carnage. The sexual assault of fellow Minuteman Sally Jupiter reveals some of these qualities. However, his extreme response to his Vietnamese girlfriend's cutting his face exemplifies a knee-jerk, violent reaction symptomatic of the brutal byproducts of intrusive American foreign policy. The cold-blooded murder is positioned as a My Lai massacre in miniature (II, 14). Obviously this behavior is worthy of contempt, but Blake's anger can be seen as directed at both Vietnam and, indirectly, at his own country, because, without the political decisions of his minders, he would not have been sent there in the first place.

The symbol employed by Blake on his Comedian costume, the "smiley face," stands as an icon for this careless chauvinism facilitated by a nihilistic ethical detachment. However, as an icon for America, it is presented in the work with multivalence as well as ambivalence. The book begins and ends with reader's focus directed to this symbol representing Edward Blake's nihilism as well as the sloppy thinking of the marginalized Right, invoked by the ketchup bespattered T-shirt of *New Frontiersman's* assistant editor (XII, 32). And while its appearance on Mars may represent playfulness on the part of Gibbons and Moore, it does expand the province of meaning, on one level giving Blake's antihumanism a broader, cosmic justification. Nevertheless, Blake's personal history and political connections cast his murder in the perspective of the questionable nature of American covert operations.

If Edward Blake represents the darker side of military intervention, Jon Osterman/Dr. Manhattan is an ostensive personification of America's strategic nuclear deterrent. The symbol on his forehead, the hydrogen atom, is simplistic in execution, yet laden with the threat of the hydrogen bomb. As Brent Fishbaugh has observed, "Moore [. . .] uses his superhero characters [. . .] as symbolic representations of hard and soft sciences and of their potential, shaped by human failings, to create utopia" (189). Fishbaugh's insight highlights an aspect of *Watchmen*

that makes it unusual in the field of Armageddon narratives. If one takes Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* and Sidney Lumet's *Fail-Safe* as templates for how the complexity of technology triggers nuclear annihilation, it is interesting to note that in *Watchmen* both political policy and execution of the nuclear deterrent are left in (admittedly fallible) *human* hands. To those familiar with Moore's work, this may at first appear a strange claim. In "The Tide of History: Alan Moore's Historiographic Vision," Sean Carney points out that one view of history in Moore's work depends on a notion of metaphysical inevitability in which "leaders do not control the tides of history—they are just surfing on them" (Moore and Villarrubia, cited in Carney). Yet, Carney argues, Moore "represents history as the contradiction between [metaphysical and material] visions of history." Ultimately, "he is concerned with *how* history is made by human beings" (Carney). And the human element is laid forth in some detail in the addendum text to the fourth issue, *Dr. Manhattan: Super-powers and the Superpowers*. While the author, Milton Glass, along with several other textual references throughout the book, labels Manhattan as a god, this brief chapter on *Realpolitik* stresses that "we have made a *man* to end all worlds" (emphasis added). In *Watchmen*, Manhattan is the guarantor for American security and global prestige. His "birth" and subsequent cooptation by the military industrial complex enabled the United States to win the Vietnam War, and his ability to mold atoms into any form whatsoever delivers on the utopian promise of nonpolluting industries, thereby freeing the United States from the strategic morass of dependence on foreign oil.

Even though Manhattan is being used by the authorities more as a technology than a diplomat, his strengths and vulnerabilities as a person are what feature most strongly in the narrative. In terms of the primacy of the liberal individual, Dr. Manhattan's "birth" verifies some immutable kernel of identity, and it is of moment that the two most "advanced" members of the Watchmen (Osterman and Veidt) testify to some notion of an immortal soul, a nonmaterial essence of personality. During his research, he is caught in a particle accelerator which obliterates his physical form, yet something of Jon Osterman's essence persists that can still act upon matter. After several trials and errors, this essence succeeds in re-fabricating a material body, though his neon-blue glow indicates his nonhumanness as much as his immense powers emphasize his superhumanness. Because his ego survived physical annihilation, and that he managed to reassemble himself so that he is

master of the forces of nature, Manhattan strikes one at first as the most secure individual of all.

It may seem oxymoronic, then, to assign agency panic to an omnipotent being. But historically the complex organizations of developing and deploying nuclear weapons contribute significantly to the worldview in which agency panic takes hold: in *Watchmen* Princeton University, the Gila Flats research laboratory, and the Rockefeller Military Research Center represent large-scale postwar organizational forms that dominate Osterman's development and control his fate. Individual initiative and agency are not put at a premium when persons actually function as parts of a greater machine (Melley 62). For example, his life-changing "accident" happens because of a safety feature of the technology; it was specifically designed to be structurally beyond human intervention (IV, 7). Likewise, omnipotent but somehow integrated, Osterman is co-opted by the military industrial complex, and, even as Dr. Manhattan, senses his lack of power: "It's all getting out of my **hands**" (IV, 12). His fatalistic perception of the universe has left him almost incapable of meaningful human interaction. In spite of his "love affair" with the most desirable woman in the series, he cannot see the world from the "human" level. He is as much a *prisoner* of time, space and matter as he is master over it. When his girlfriend complains "Is that all you **are**? The most powerful thing in the **universe**, and you're just a **puppet** following a **script**?" he replies: "We are all puppets, Laurie. I'm just a puppet who can see the **strings**" (IX, 5). Volition on the human level is not beyond him, but below him. He experiences all time as an augmented simultaneity, so he is the ultimate fatalist: he knows the future as well as the past, but can alter neither. He accepts his role as America's strategic deterrent without question, and yet he allows a mere television interviewer to shame him off the planet. At the end of the novel he elects to avoid personal interaction with humans forever. Ironically, Dr. Manhattan suffers under an analogue of the sort of agency panic American society experienced after the Manhattan project, with a diluted sense of free will. In *Watchmen*, his knowledge and perspective disqualify the possibility of individual agency categorically.

In this light, both the Comedian and Dr. Manhattan are metaphorically transferred from hyperindividualistic costumed crime fighters into the more or less willing tools of American foreign policy. What the United States abhors domestically is therefore defused by being

exported. The other characters to be discussed in this article have been legally prevented from practicing their craft by a piece of legislation known as the Keene Act of 1977, a measure outlawing all forms of costumed crime fighting. Both Ozymandias and Rorschach have adopted strategies to circumvent the spirit of this law—the former by feigning a whole-hearted conversion to entrepreneurial capitalism, and the latter by flagrantly thumbing his nose at it, persisting in his personal brand of costumed vigilantism.

Rorschach, who, by virtue of his mask, bears a constantly *shifting* outward identity, is the most uncompromising individual among the Watchmen, exemplified by his sense of integrity, goal directedness, and resistance to indoctrination, chief among these the professed “cures” of psychiatric medicine. At first, this may not be obvious; while Rorschach himself never endorses the diagnosis of paranoia, both in the other characters’ and the readers’ field of perception, the moniker seems to fit. In spite of his shifting facial features, in spite of being repeatedly subjected to institutions specifically designed to alter outlook and behavior, and in spite of what others regard as florid paranoia, Rorschach consistently battles for his individual integrity. This is consistent with Timothy Melley’s argument:

that “paranoid” interpretations are often complex and self-defeating attempts to preserve a familiar concept of subjectivity. [. . .] They sometimes amount, then, not only to a self-defensive posture in the face of external controls, but to a fraught and paradoxical defense of liberal individualism itself. (23)

At a fundamental level, Rorschach’s “paranoia” is a reflection of his hyperindividualist stand. So if paranoia and resistance to the collective are indicative of one’s attempt to fend off agency panic, Rorschach is the poster child of the liberal individual in *Watchmen*.

His out-of-costume persona as a sign-toting harbinger of the Christian apocalypse, as well as his reactionary worldview, characterize him as an ultraconservative of a particular ilk, something akin to members of militia movements, which on one level, is what the Watchmen is. Alan Moore has aligned Rorschach, then, with what may be termed “the lunatic right-wing fringe.” He is a faithful reader of *New Frontiersman*, and Rorschach’s world is illustrated in their editorial cartoon: Jews, Negro drug dealers, organized crime, and the liberal press are in league to destroy America, depicted here as a costumed crime fighter,

with the support and backing of the Soviet Union (VIII *New Frontiersman*, 3). Antisemitic, homophobic, a paranoid millennialist who routinely breaks the fingers of those he interrogates, there is little in Rorschach to inspire empathy and identification. Matthew Wolf-Meyer points out, "Rorschach's popularity among readers, and supposed centrality to the series . . . is admittedly disturbing," and allegedly contrary to the intentions of the author: "Moore ultimately felt that [*Watchmen*] had failed, as too many readers identified with Rorschach rather than the more complex Veidt or Dr. Manhattan" (507). The key to whatever empathy Rorschach may garner from the readership of *Watchmen* may be based in his resilience in the face of everything that would undermine his identity.

Born Walter Joseph Kovacs, son of a prostitute, he is the product of "institutions" as much as accident. While growing up, he experiences orphanage, reform school, hospital, and prison; he represents the tangle of personal identity, which can result from such a trajectory. The murder of Kitty Genovese inspired him to pursue a career of costumed vigilantism. After a violent act of vengeance against a murderer, Kovacs's "was reborn [. . .], free to scrawl [his] own design on this morally blank world" (VI, 26). In the sixth installment, when this defining episode was revealed to the prison psychiatrist, the force of Rorschach worldview converts the psychiatrist—"We are alone. There is nothing else."—and illustrates that Rorschach's ideology is as far away from the collective as one is possible to get (VI, 28).

In spite of being in the care of larger "organizations," he remains immune to all of the efforts of identity formation these institutions practice. On the contrary, in the eighth volume, Rorschach is shown to be the master of the most coercive institution of all, the maximum-security prison. After he thwarts an attempt on his life, he declares, "None of you understand. I'm not locked up in here with you. You're locked up in here with me" (VI, 13). Cues to Rorschach's extreme remoteness from society come on the first page of *Watchmen*: ". . . all the whores and politicians will look up and shout 'save us!' . . . and I'll look down and whisper 'no.'" "Don't tell me they didn't have a choice," he intones bitterly, suggesting already here that Rorschach's position is one of meting out individual responsibility, even in the face of a collective problem (I, 1). Indeed, to Rorschach, individuals, and individuals only, impose meaning and are responsible for history (VI, 26). Likewise, the first issue concludes with Rorschach's categorical

Manichean perspective iterated: "Why does [Blake's] death matter against so many? Because there is good and there is evil, and evil must be punished. Even in the face of Armageddon I shall not compromise in this" (I, 24).

And his death in the twelfth issue bears this out; his spurning of the necessities of the collective is absolute. The reason that Dr. Manhattan has to kill him is that Rorschach would rather flip humanity back onto the brink of atomic apocalypse than compromise and silently accept Edward Blake's murder (XII, 23–24). When Dr. Manhattan declares that he cannot allow Rorschach to return to America to tell the truth about Ozymandias' mass killing, Rorschach says as he is removing his mask: "Of course. [You] must protect Veidt's new utopia. One more body amongst the foundations makes little difference." And once he has fully exposed the face of Walter Kovacs he urges Manhattan to "DO IT!" This apparently irrational death wish is Kovacs' compromise; he has returned to his original identity, angered but whole, ready for death. After annihilation, all that remains is blood spattered on the snow, his hat, and the Rorschach mask, but reduced to a circle with a single perfectly round black blotch in the middle, indicating a composed, if gory, sense of closure.

There is much that is unresolved in Rorschach, and, as mentioned above, Moore claims that he actually would have preferred that his readers grasped the "utopian possibilities" represented by Ozymandias or Dr. Manhattan. From a purely ideological reading, this would be far from simple: Dr. Manhattan spends his earthly existence working for the United States Military as a weapon of mass destruction; and Veidt's business acumen combined with a hubris-fueled distance to other humans puts him strongly in the camp of capitalism, especially given that his products' commercial footprints expand in response to the vagaries of the war machine. Still Rorschach is the easiest target of disdain, as he represents the most unsavory part of American culture; he is a right-wing nut, a paranoid vigilante in dire need of a shower and a gift card to the Gap.

But this disdain should be reconsidered given the ambiguity inherent in the character and the structure of the narrative. The most "normal" of the Watchmen, Dan Dreiberg, a.k.a. the Nite Owl, actually counts Rorschach as a *friend*. Even if empathy for this character is not part of authorial intent, there is undeniably a textual preoccupation with his figure; the reader is (by design) meant to ponder Kovacs more

than any other character. He is the first of the costumed crime fighters mentioned by name (I, 4). Furthermore, his costume, and assumed identity begs for interpretation: in the scheme of costumed crime fighters, an owl is an owl, a hydrogen atom is a hydrogen atom. But, a Rorschach blot is simply an abstract black and white figure that means nothing without the act of human interpretation. In other words, the reader is expected to puzzle over Rorschach as one would an inkblot. What does he *mean*? As one who chooses annihilation rather than sacrificing his integrity, this is the figure the reader is meant to ponder and figure out. On this level, Rorschach personifies the struggle between the individual and the collective. To the degree that he is the focus of *Watchmen*, the same could be said of the work as a whole.

In addition there is a textual cue of another order, and that is the parallel between the narrative of *Watchmen* and Rorschach's journal. This graphic novel is rich in intertextuality: Biblical quotations and popular song lyrics contribute to the installment titles; the end sections are filled with various prose texts that shed more light on characters and plot. The only history of the original Minutemen, *Under the Hood*, binds the first three issues together; the opposing partisan newspapers, *New Frontiersman* and *The Nova Express* provide further background insight; and frames and pages from the comic book *The Black Freighter* thrum along in close harmony with the plot of *Watchmen*. But as the "voice over" from the principle "detective" in this narrative, Rorschach's journal is in a privileged position. In the appendix to *Absolute Watchmen*, Moore indicates that his inspiration for this project comes in part from Orwell's *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*, a novel that features Winston Smith's journal (*Minutes*, "Alan Moore"). In the course of the narrative, Rorschach writes *and revises* his testament for the future, and, in spite of his death, his journal survives and may again demystify a population driven for the moment to a protective, collective paranoia, though this possibility is remote.

Dan Dreiberg presents a worldview closest to what may be termed in this series as "normal," exhibiting an ordinary degree of perplexity over America's difficulties. As Rorschach's partner, he is also his foil. He is bewildered by the violence and decay he witnesses. "But the country's **disintegrating**. What happened to the American **dream**?" the Comedian answers "It came **true**. You're **looking** at it" (II, 18). Also, the reader's empathy may be drawn to Dreiberg's budding romance with Manhattan's girlfriend, Laurie, especially his human frailty

in the face of looming nuclear annihilation, as shown by his sexual dysfunction: "It's this **war**, the feeling that it's **unavoidable**. It makes me feel so **powerless**. So impotent" (VII, 19). But that sense of impotence and powerlessness evaporates when he dons his costume again and liberates his former partner to solve what is the central crime, the attack on the "masks." For all his apparent reticence and normalcy, it is Dreiberg who discovers Ozymandias' role as villain. And as a voice of tempered, reasonable compromise, once he understands how nuclear war was averted, he acquiesces to it (XII, 20). Dreiberg sacrifices principle to pragmatism, especially if it means he can carry on with some sort of ordinary existence. The dénouement of the novel has him and Laurie living a decent bourgeois life, and he is performing one of the most vulnerable of human actions, meeting the mother-in-law.

The last character to be discussed is Adrian Veidt, a.k.a. Ozymandias. He is the quintessence of the self-made man in the Charles Atlas mold: he comes from an affluent family, gives away his inheritance and starts from scratch and is on a constant program of self-improvement (XI *Nova Express*, 9). That Ozymandias markets action figures in his own likeness, that he sells cologne as well as toys, and that he advertises in comic books may indicate that his "strive-toward-self-improvement" attitude is meant to be presented in an ironic light. Also, Veidt's capitalist acumen is tainted by a lack of compassion, and an ends-justify-the-means mentality. Nowhere is this clearer than in his murder of the Comedian simply because he stumbled onto his plan, and his trans-dimensional attack on New York City in effect makes him the greatest mass murderer in history. As the "smartest man in America," he also stands for the well-meaning intelligentsia, the validated expert of our society, the scientist. He is the most self-actualized of the costumed crime fighters, in bourgeois terms, and in his success he comes to assume a pharaoh-like disdain for humanity. Yet at the same time, all of his efforts for the last two decades have been directed toward one goal—to save humanity from itself—and, as incredible as the plan may be, he *succeeds*.

In the figure of Ozymandias, Alan Moore iterates the primacy of the *individual*, but in the interest of the *collective*. He is the self-made man and capitalist philanthropist rolled into one. As an agency panic narrative, *Watchmen* preserves the notion of power and effectiveness of individual action in the face of ever more complex and technologically advanced systems. Veidt believes in an immortal soul that survives the

body,⁴ and yet, through his machinations with his diverse corporate holdings, he has fused his individuality with a corporation for what he sees as a necessary plan to preserve civilization and human life. While there is much merit in Wolf-Meyer's point that Ozymandias represents the utopian longing for a better human future, his "triumph" should be regarded as severely attenuated. This is not a case of an "übermensch [. . .] [uplifting] [. . .] humanity" (507). The Veidt method, after all, was for sale; and humankind did not improve all that much due to its successful marketing. Rather, Ozymandias' plan is merely damage control. In the logic of the narrative, Ozymandias is at best a Carlylean "hero," one man who makes history, but nevertheless, a man. His trans-dimensional "joke" that postpones humankind's demise is fundamentally a product of tried and true entrepreneurial techniques—the artists and scientists who brought the monster to fruition were hired and organized specifically for this end. Ozymandias' almost child-like need for approval and assurance from Dr. Manhattan in the concluding chapter, combined with his obvious shock with the realization of the transience of his victory puts Veidt firmly in the human-all-too-human camp at the end of the novel.

Perhaps ultimately, *all* of the characters and American identities are presented in an ironic light to a satirical aim. This aim is complex, and relates to American identity externally—in the realm of international politics—and internally, in terms of typically American domestic tensions. As world policemen, the Comedian and Dr. Manhattan are portrayed ambiguously, but mostly in a negative light. Their debut as willing tools of American foreign policy in the Vietnam War would be, for most readers, a questionable use of their talents. Dr. Manhattan's godlike detachment in the end views humans as mere playthings. When Ozymandias points out that Manhattan had "regained interest in **human life**," he replies "Yes, I have. I think perhaps I'll **create** some" (XII, 27). The Comedian's covert exploits in Latin America and other Third World countries up to his death are analogous to the Reagan administration's dealings in Central America revealed during the Iran-Contra hearings, not exactly America's finest hour regardless of which side of the political fence one sits.

Domestically, Rorschach defies the rule of law to pursue his brand of vigilante justice. His hyperconservative individualism takes on the cast of paranoia in this story; and his belief system and personal hygiene issues do make him an easy figure for ridicule. Yet, his paranoia was not

baseless: he was *right*: there *was* a conspiracy against the *Watchmen*, and the end of the world *was* nigh. And though his efforts combined with the others did nothing to prevent it, it was Rorschach's uncompromising insistence on truth and justice that revealed the force behind both the conspiracy against the costumed crime fighters and the elaborately arranged pseudo-Apocalypse. Ironically, as one burdened by clinical psychological problems, he is of all the costumed crime fighters, the least affected by agency panic. Ozymandias is in the end the mortal individual who has allowed himself to be most absorbed by the collective, turning the Adrian Veidt name into a corporatist entity on par with the forces of the military industrial complex. Rorschach's highlighted agency combined with an inability to compromise, even unto death, make heroism out of pathology. But, it is odd that Alan Moore was not aware that this figure would generate sympathy among his audience. At this point it would be helpful to return to Wolf-Meyer's assertion that superhero comics and their devoted audience seem incapable of grasping the utopian possibilities that such superheroes and fantastic worlds make possible. In particular, why are the majority of readers (and, unwittingly, the author) more empathetic to Rorschach's moral stance than Ozymandias' übermensch decisiveness?

Initially, one could point out that all of the active *Watchmen* except Dreiberg and Rorschach operate at the highest levels of corporate/fascist power. However, the key to this puzzle probably lies in the primacy of the liberal individual, especially in the American psyche. As Timothy Melley shows, individual resistance to being incorporated into the larger organization is a *fantasy*, but, at the level of artistic and aesthetic production and reception, it is a powerful and persistent one (188). George Orwell has observed that the very act of authorship is a *political* act against "the destruction of liberalism" (132). The same is true of some types of reading. For the readers of graphic novels may recognize, as John Fiske suggests, "a progressive potential" in this popular culture text, characterizing aspects of hegemonic power and "[validating] [. . .] tactical resistance to it" (61). And this is a healthy thing for our culture. For, if the "individual" is to be considered a mere construction, an affect of discourse, so most surely is the "collective." There is an inherent danger in awaiting the Nietzschean superman to bring humankind to the next level, or to surrender to Carlyle's hero, particularly during times of social crisis. The ever-present hazard is that reprehensible actions can be justified with the threat or promise of

historical inevitability, one of the hallmarks of all brands of totalitarian thought.⁵

Notes

1. A paper more focused on the graphic elements would emphasize David Gibbons' contribution to *Watchmen*, and there is no doubt that the book would have been markedly different without his collaboration. Nevertheless, this article treats Alan Moore as the author of this text.
2. In Darko Suvin's structuralist poetics of science fiction, the reasoned explanation of what would otherwise be fantasy in a story (e.g., flying cars, teleportation) makes a story *cognitive*. To the degree that this is done with the characters Dr. Manhattan and the high-tech tool kit of Nite Owl and Ozymandias, as well as the teleportation of the trans-dimensional monster that kills half of New York, *Watchmen*, is a work of science fiction. For a fuller discussion of cognitive and noncognitive genres (see Darko Suvin 8–20).
3. For *Watchmen*, this paper indicates the original issue number in Roman numerals and the page in Arabic. Throughout the text, "issue," "installment," and "chapter" are used interchangeably. This acknowledges the original publication form as well as the form that most contemporary readers find *Watchmen* today with all the individual issues bound as chapters in one volume.
4. *Watchmen*, X: "The Veidt Method." "Both the body and the mind are part of a biological robot that our immaterial souls inhabit."
5. According to Hannah Arendt, totalitarianism is dependent upon the perceived inevitability of ideology. In this way, Communism under Stalin employed history and Nazism under Hitler used race to provide a *telos* to motivate and entrap their subjects (see Arendt 460–79).

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